



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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HEARING

ON

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Chairman Schatz, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is a distinct honor to appear before you to share the accomplishments of my colleagues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and our efforts to facilitate the legitimate travel of millions of tourists, businesspeople, students, and other visitors to the United States.

The advances we have made are a credit to the hard work of consular staff around the world, but especially in emerging markets, where we've seen the greatest increases in demand for U.S. visas. I would like to update you on the efforts we have undertaken over the past few years.

Meeting Increasing Worldwide Demand for U.S. Visas

I am pleased to testify to the enormous strides we have made in facilitating legitimate travel to the United States in support of the National Travel and Tourism Strategy. We recognize, as Secretary Kerry testified in April, that economic policy is foreign policy. We have sharpened our thinking about how market forces can advance our foreign policy goals. As a Bureau, we have made it easier for businesses to work with our embassies, and we have encouraged our consular officers to uphold the highest levels of public service. Our consular officers have

always understood that they are often the first interaction a foreigner will have with an American official. The visa process protects our borders, but it is also an integral part of our public face beyond those borders. This is why we are committed to make that process as straightforward, clear, and applicant-focused as possible, without compromising security.

We remain actively engaged in supporting the President's National Travel and Tourism Strategy Goals. Over the past year we have: continued to work with Brand USA on its communications plan for visa and port of entry policies and other projects; added travel and tourism links on embassies' and consulates' websites; launched a redesign of our primary website, Travel.State.Gov, to enable applicants to view critical information about the visa application process in a more streamlined, straightforward way; and participated in travel and tourism conferences and panels throughout the country, including the La Cita de las Americas Travel Conference, the Latin American Chamber of Commerce Annual Meeting in September, the Society of American Travel Writers 2013 Convention in October, the SelectUSA Summit in November, and the United States Travel Association's IPW trade show in April. The Bureau also participates fully in the Department of Commerce's travel and tourism initiatives, including attending the private-sector-led Travel and Tourism Advisory Board committee meetings, as

well as co-chairing (with the Departments of Homeland Security and Commerce) the Ease of Travel Working Group as part of the Tourism Policy Council. At our most recent Tourism Policy Council meeting, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, who serves as chair, and Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, who is helping lead implementation of the Strategy, commended Consular Affairs for its hard work in keeping visa wait times low and improving the visa process, thereby attracting more visitors to the United States.

Consular officers at 224 embassies and consulates overseas issued almost 9.2 million nonimmigrant visas in fiscal year 2013, a 42 percent increase in just three years. We managed this dramatic growth by expanding our facilities, adding hundreds of new consular staff, and most importantly, streamlining procedures to maximize efficiency. International visitors spent a record-breaking \$180.7 billion in 2013, an increase of more than nine percent compared to 2012. And as the Department of Commerce has previously indicated, increased international travel generates significant job growth: the growth in international visitors has supported roughly 175,000 new American jobs over the past five years.

For many foreign visitors, the American experience begins in consular waiting rooms overseas. We take that responsibility seriously, and have worked

with groups like Disney Worldwide Services and Brand USA to improve applicants' experience in our spaces. In China and Brazil, most applicants are in and out of our facilities in less than 30 minutes. In our London waiting room, we present applicants with materials from state and regional tourism boards, inviting business travelers and workers to extend their trips with a leisure component so they can enjoy their U.S. experience in addition to conducting business.

International travel and tourism has a deep impact on the United States, comprising 27 percent of the U.S.' services exports and supporting 1.3 million jobs. We are pleased to have a role in support of these hardworking Americans.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs continues to do its part to facilitate the President's goals in Executive Order 13597, which in January 2012 directed federal agencies to aggressively expand the nation's ability to attract and welcome visitors while maintaining high standards of security. Since August 2012, Consular Affairs has met the goal to interview 80 percent of visa applicants worldwide within three weeks of submitting their applications. In 2013, the global average was over 92 percent; a 10 percent increase over 2012. At our busiest overseas post, Sao Paulo, Brazil, where we issued over half a million nonimmigrant visas in fiscal year 2013, appointment wait times are consistently less than one week.

The role of security has not diminished

Consular officers, in addition to being the first Americans many foreigners will encounter, are also our country's first line of defense. Every visa decision is a national security decision. We train our staff extensively and continuously on interviewing and name-checking techniques, fraud detection, and the use of myriad automated systems. Every visa adjudication comprises extensive biometric and biographic checks supported by a clearance process including data from the intelligence and law-enforcement communities, ensuring that our officers have the best data available at all times. We've improved this process in the last year, ensuring that we target more of our resources towards individuals who may pose a threat.

Meeting Demand, Especially in Emerging Economies

In 2013, Brazilian visitors contributed \$10.5 billion to the U.S. economy, a 13 percent increase from the prior year. During the same period, Chinese visitors contributed \$9.8 billion, an 11 percent increase from the prior year, or \$5,400 per

visitor. To address this important opportunity to contribute to our country's economy, 167 officers perform consular work in Mission China. Consular Affairs created over 50 new officer positions in China in fiscal year 2012 alone. In the same year, we increased consular staffing in Mission Brazil by 40 percent within six months, and eventually increased staffing by more than 100 percent. We met the President's Executive Order target of 40 percent capacity increase in Brazil in June 2012 and in China in November 2012, both ahead of schedule.

Coping with the explosive growth in demand for nonimmigrant visas in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico has been a major challenge for Consular Affairs over the past several years, but is one which we have addressed vigorously and successfully. We continue to direct our personnel and resources towards the locations with the greatest need, applying innovative solutions to these critical markets.

In 2011, we realized our traditional hiring mechanisms wouldn't allow us to deploy officers quickly enough to meet exploding visa demand in Brazil and China. We weren't recruiting enough Portuguese- and Mandarin-speaking officers and could not wait for new entry-level officers to learn these essential languages. In response, the Department created a rapid hiring pilot program to ramp up

staffing at critical needs posts. These adjudicators met a high bar for qualifications and underwent a rigorous screening process to assess their skills and background for these positions. The first class of these adjudicators, appointed for one-year periods and limited to a maximum of five consecutive years, began in January 2012. That year, we brought on a total of 24 Mandarin-speakers and 19 Portuguese-speakers, all of whom arrived at posts by mid-July. In fiscal year 2013, we expanded the program to recruit Spanish-speakers. To date, we have hired and deployed 59 adjudicators under this program to China, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic, representing an added capacity of 900,000 visa adjudications per year.

We are working to expand and remodel our consular facilities so we can interview more visa applicants on a daily basis. We are expanding our interviewing capacity in China by adding 22 new service windows in Guangzhou, 20 new windows in Shanghai, eight new windows in Chengdu, and eight new windows in Beijing. We expect one million Indians to visit the United States in 2015, and in recent years opened new consulate facilities in Hyderabad and Mumbai to handle the additional workload. In the coming years we will open entirely new visa-processing facilities in Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and Wuhan, China.

We also prioritize key groups of travelers, such as students and business visitors. Wait times for student visa interview appointments worldwide are less than 15 days. We prioritize student visa appointments because of the tremendous intellectual, social, and economic benefits foreign students provide to the U.S. economy. According to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, international students contributed \$24.7 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2011-2012 academic year. U.S. officials work closely with the American Chambers of Commerce in more than 100 countries to streamline the visa process for business travelers, and all U.S. embassies and consulates have established procedures to expedite appointments for urgent business travel.

The Global Support Strategy is a worldwide program to optimize visa application support services, including: information provision through call centers and email correspondence, appointments, fee collection, document delivery, greeters, and in some cases, biometric collection services. Offsite biometric collection facilities are in operation in Mexico, Brazil, India, Argentina, and Colombia; online scheduling makes getting an appointment easy and transparent for applicants; and with oversight by the Department, our contractors handle routine telephone and email inquiries in many markets. This frees up space and

staff at our embassies and consulates, creating additional capacity and allowing us to focus on the critical security-related screening that cannot be outsourced. We expect to have offsite support services in most of our consular sections worldwide by the end of this year.

We are moving towards a foil-less nonimmigrant visa. The visa application has been fully electronic since 2010, and the next step is eliminating the visa foil itself. Leveraging our existing electronic systems and connections with our interagency partners will enable us to save money and reduce document fraud by eliminating the printed visa.

Interviews and Reciprocity

One of the most effective ways we have to improve the efficiency of visa operations is to eliminate in-person interviews for low-risk travelers, while retaining all of the security checks that apply to every visa applicant. Although the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) requires our consular officers to interview in-person all visa applicants aged 14 through 79, it also provides limited authority to waive interviews, including authority to waive for diplomatic and official applicants from foreign governments and for some repeat applicants. We are

utilizing technology and advanced fraud detection techniques to help us expand the pool of applicants for whom interviews can be waived under the Interview Waiver Program. This allows us to focus resources on higher-risk visa applicants while facilitating travel for low-risk applicants.

We are working with our colleagues across the government to expand this successful program, which became permanent in January 2014. In fiscal year 2013, we waived over 380,000 interviews, and a recent study showed that tourist and business visitor visa holders whose interviews were waived, all of whom were subject to the full scope of security checks, posed no greater risk for an overstay than those who were interviewed. We are interested in explicit legislative authority to supplement the existing Interview Waiver Program by adding additional low-risk applicant groups such as citizens of Visa Waiver Program members applying for other types of visas such as student or work visas; continuing students moving to a higher level of education; non-U.S. citizen Global Entry and NEXUS trusted traveler program members; and holders of visas in other categories, such as students and workers, who wish to travel for tourism or business. The Department is interested in working with Congress on legislation specifically authorizing the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security to enhance our interview waiver programs.

The law also requires us to set visa validity based on the validity of visas issued to U.S. citizens on a reciprocal basis. Following the Chinese government's formal offer in September 2012 to expand validity to five years, multiple entries for a host of visa categories, the interagency community has engaged in a series of meetings to assess the full range of implications and economic, cultural, and political benefits of longer visa validities for Chinese nationals. In 2013, we agreed to extend the validity of crewmember and transit visas to five years, multiple entries. Increasing Chinese visa validity for tourists, businesspeople, and students would provide a significant boost to the U.S. economy and would help Mission China successfully manage its consular resources. Of course, the Department does not act alone when it comes to decisions about visa validity; we must consult with the Department of Homeland Security and with other interagency partners where appropriate prior to increasing any period of visa validity.

Finally, we are working with our U.S. government colleagues to expand the Visa Waiver Program, consistent with U.S. law, as was recently done with the addition of Chile to the program earlier this year. With this designation, Chile now joins 37 other participants and is currently the only participant from Latin America.

The Department supports the proposed amendments contained in the Senate-passed Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, because we believe they would restructure the Visa Waiver Program in a manner that would strengthen law enforcement cooperation, while maintaining the program's robust counterterrorism and criminal information sharing initiatives and promoting commerce and tourism in the United States.

However, we do not recommend offering premium visa processing. We believe many visa applicants would be willing to pay any "premium processing fee" in the false belief that payment of a higher fee will ensure visa issuance, thus making any such program less efficient and compromising the integrity of the visa process. The best approach to achieve greater efficiencies is the continued prioritization of student, medical, and urgent business travel applications, which is already in effect at consular posts worldwide. We will also pursue increased visa validity where reciprocal agreement can be obtained with interagency support.

Conclusion

As consular officers, we occupy a unique space at the nexus of foreign policy and national security. We are first and foremost diplomats representing the

United States. We strongly support the efforts of the Administration to improve the standing of the United States as a welcoming, exciting destination for travelers around the world. And we play an important role in our nation's security, emphasizing at every available opportunity the primacy of security considerations in all our processes. This is drilled into every officer from the first day of training, and it is enforced by our systems as a part of every visa adjudication. We understand that maintaining secure borders complements our mission to facilitate legitimate travel.

The extent of our daily direct contact with the world gives us a perspective unlike any other in the U.S. government. Our officers study their host countries and become intimately familiar with their customs and cultures. When combined with in-depth training and knowledge of immigration law, the result is a singular ability to conduct visa operations around the globe, with our multifaceted national interest the ultimate beneficiary of our expertise.

Our work affects U.S. interests directly on a basic, human level. Every issuance and refusal touches a person, a responsibility we take seriously. It is incumbent upon us to treat those individuals with the respect and dignity they deserve, and our service orientation demonstrates that every hour of every day.

The Department of State is committed to improving our service and our security continuously, and we will apply every resource at our disposal to that end.

This concludes my testimony today. I will be pleased to take your questions.